

## Baird Leads Congressional Effort to Promote Returning Veterans' Services Programs (May 3, 2005)

Washington, D.C. - In his continued work to assist veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, this week Rep. Brian Baird (D-WA) invited Iraq war veterans and VA officials to speak to the Democratic Caucus and provided all Members of Congress and their staffs with wallet cards listing contact information for local Vet Centers that offer free veterans counseling services.

Managed by the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Vet Center program is a network of 206 community-based outpatient counseling centers that provide free counseling services to veterans and their families on a variety of readjustment issues, including substance abuse, anxiety, depression, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

It is very common for veterans who have recently returned from the battlefield to experience symptoms of PTSD, such as depression or anxiety. Fortunately, there are professionals available through Vet Centers around the country who offer free services to veterans experiencing these difficulties," said Baird, a former VA Psychologist. "The problem is that too many veterans simply don't know about these Vet Centers. As one step in my continued effort to increase awareness about veterans' mental health care issues, I am proud to have formed a bipartisan group to raise awareness about Vet Center services among my colleagues in Congress. Helping our veterans is not a Democrat or Republican issue, it is an American responsibility."

After holding a series of Congressional briefings about veterans' mental health issues and the Vet Center program, Rep. Baird took the initiative to make sure every Member of Congress had the contact information for local Vet Centers in their congressional districts with them at all times. Rep. Baird worked with VA and Vet Center officials to create laminated wallet cards listing local contact names and locations for Vet Centers in each member's congressional district and recently distributed these wallet cards to all Members of Congress and their staffs. Rep. Baird was joined in his effort to disseminate the Vet Center wallet cards to every members of congress by his congressional colleagues, Reps. Kevin Brady (R-TX), Jo Ann Emerson (R-MO), and Patrick Kennedy (D-RI).

To promote the issue further, Rep. Baird invited Iraq war veterans and Vet Center Officials to address the Democratic Caucus about veterans' mental health care issues and the Vet Center program. Dr. Charles Flora, Associate Director of the national Vet Center Program, and Paul Rieckhoff, Executive Director of Operation Truth—an organization for veterans who have recently returned from service in Iraq and Afghanistan—joined Reps. Baird and Kennedy to speak to the House Democratic Caucus about the challenges facing returning veterans.

"The mental toll that this war has had on our newest generation of Veterans is severe--and growing. PTSD could very well be my generation's Agent Orange Syndrome," said Rieckhoff, who is himself a veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom. "Our troops and veterans are tired of partisan politics. We need some action."

"The Vet Centers are the people in VA who welcome home war veterans with honor by providing quality readjustment in a caring manner," said Dr. Alfonso Batres, Director of the national Vet Center Program and Chief of Readjustment Counseling Services for the Department of Veterans Affairs. "Vet Centers understand and appreciate veterans' war experiences while assisting them and their family members toward a successful post-war adjustment in or near their community."

"We need a coordinated effort to make sure those who need help know how to get help. At least 17 percent of service members returning from Iraq are expected to suffer from PTSD or a similar mental health ailment," said Baird. "Congressional Republicans and Democrats alike need to make veterans' mental healthcare issues a top priority."

A New England Journal of Medicine study conducted in 2004 showed that 17% of service members returning from Iraq had experienced depression, anxiety, or PTSD. The study also showed that of those affected, less than 40% received

mental health care treatment (<http://content.nejm.org/cgi/content/short/351/1/13>).

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